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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this survey was to describe how selected U.S. government agencies provide information to the public via Internet services. A total of 19 World Wide Web sites were selected for the survey. Findings are reported related to types of resources made available, how sites identify available information, accessibility of information identified by search applications, the presence of "Kid's Pages," online information referrals (links) to other sites, and notable or unique applications. The following preliminary conclusions are presented: (1) most sites use a combination of bibliographic records, browse applications, and search windows for identifying and providing access to online information; (2) with the exception of two sites, GILS (Global Information Locator Service) applications are not used for identification/access to information; (3) no one method, either bibliographic records, browse applications, search windows, or GILS applications account for 100% of the means for identifying or accessing online information; and (4) at most sites, a user's ability to identify online resources does not guarantee access to resources that have been identified. (MES)

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An Initial Survey and Description of How Selected United States Government Libraries, Information Centers, and Information Services Provide Public Access to Information Via the Internet

ED 454 870

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Purpose

The purpose of this survey is to describe how selected United States Government agencies provide information to the public via Internet services. With more than 2,000 Federal library and information centers located throughout the world this effort, of necessity, is selective and findings neither represent all libraries nor do they identify all approaches currently used to present information via the Web. [i]

An effort has been made to describe services without attributing values to particular site characteristics, e.g., bibliographic record applications are not considered superior to browse applications. Those who wish to consider evaluative criteria applicable to such an effort may consult a recently published study entitled Performance Measures for Federal Agency Websites: Final Report, by Charles R. McClure, et.al. [ii]

This report provides a brief snapshot in time of a complex and rapidly evolving world. While not definitive in scope, it is hoped that this report will provide a baseline for anyone who may wish to revisit some of these sites in the future to determine how services may have been expanded, reduced, or refined.

IR 058 161

Methodology

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Nineteen sites have been selected for this survey. Sites were selected after being identified through linkage applications for online government information resources or by consulting the United States Government Manual [iii]. I express, in advance, my regret for the unintended omission of sites that would have significantly contributed to the collection of data or to an understanding of how selected Federal agencies provide information to the public via the Internet. Those who wish to provide referrals to additional sites, to correct site information that was gathered before October 27, 2000, or to advise me of changes that have occurred since the 27th may do so by contacting me at: *tdowning@gpo.gov*.

Sites with significant access or security restrictions for most of their applications have not been included in the survey. Several non-intelligence community sites with restricted applications have been included because, in my judgement, substantive applications were accessible.

As might be expected the nineteen sites remaining within this survey are similar in many respects, dissimilar in some respects and many possess notable attributes. Notable or unique attributes not anticipated within the survey checklist are not represented in the matrix but are selectively noted as part of a narrative.

Relying on my eyes and judgement (sometimes enfeebled by staring too long at a screen) I have attempted to provide a singular review of resources that corresponds with a consistent effort to match characteristics with matrix topics. This approach reduces the likelihood that more than one person will see either resources or matrix topics differently and also places responsibility for omissions with one person.

An average of slightly more than one hour has been spent per site. As befits averages, approximately one hour was inadequate for some sites and more than adequate for others. Time spent viewing those sites chosen for the matrix varied from approximately forty minutes to approximately one-hundred-thirty minutes. Times spent viewing sites varied depending upon how many applications were available to review, how easily they were to identify and test and, I admit, on how entertaining (or not) the site was to visit. I believe that I have made reasonable efforts to work through applications to discover subsidiary resources that are not readily apparent from the main page of a site. However, it is possible that some notable applications were not identified because, at the time of viewing, they were deeply imbedded in pages far from the main site page.

Three important factors affecting the quality of site reviews and the use of sites are how readily identifiable, organized, and intuitive site applications are for people to use. No effort has been made to apply these subjective factors for an evaluation of sites. Those who wish to form their own conclusions relative to this survey may access what I consider the main page of each site via hyper links from each institution within the matrix. I thank Mr. Theodore Defosse, of my staff, for his assistance with making this matrix presentable and for creating hyperlinks to site applications.

Background and Rationale to Selected Questions:

A number of questions made part of this survey require explanation. The first two survey questions are intended to determine how many sites describe themselves as "digital" or "virtual" libraries, etc. These are matters of nomenclature and self-definition with no clear meaning as to what a user should expect of sites identified by such terms. Only two of nineteen sites within the survey use either term.

The question, "No collection of online works: search engine only" is intended to identify those sites that provide a search engine only from which to launch Internet inquiries. A search engine only application is seen as distinct from those sites that provide access to a collection of resources via bibliographic records, browse applications, or a keyword search window. In my judgement, only two sites of nineteen consist of a search engine only.

The question associated with archiving of resources for "permanent" access is a very difficult question to answer. With the exception of the Library of Congress and the U.S. Government Printing Office (each with statements indicating archival activities) it is not presently known to what extent other institutions are making efforts to assure permanent public access to online resources. No readily identified statements concerning archives or permanent access to online resources were discovered at other sites.

The portion concerned with "Bibliographic Record Applications" relates to applications that use distinct records to describe resources in bibliographic terms, i.e., title, series, classification, subjects, notes, etc. No effort has been made to determine cataloging standards used in creating records. Similarly, no effort has been made to account for the many differing methods of displaying such information.

The National Transportation Library (NTL) contains a search engine that produces records of resources that correspond more closely with what could be identified as "citations" (basically a search engine generated title) than bibliographic records. In effect, these citations are composed of elements of search results and do not presently represent distinctive bibliographic records. This situation was not anticipated by survey questions.

The question, "Online resource records contain online addresses?" is for those who wish to identify the URL associated with a link in a record so that, if the link is broken, information concerning the most recent link may be available for re-establishing a connection. Some bibliographic applications take users to online resources without an address in the record.

As with the first two survey questions, the question, "Are some resources identifiable via 'Subject Bibliographies'?" is more a matter of nomenclature than of substance. In effect, no distinction is made, except in name, between those browse applications that identify resources by topic and those that do so by the term "subject bibliographies". A "yes" to the former question need not require a "yes" to the later question.

Several questions concern GILS applications. The term GILS has evolved in recent years from representing "Government Information Locator Service" to "Global Information Locator Service". Over

time, the use of GILS by Federal agencies to identify and locate their information resources has seemed sporadic and varied. Survey results indicate that, at present, few Federal agencies provide this service in conjunction with web pages associated with libraries, information centers, and information services.

One of the most persistently difficult site characteristics to identify concerns the matter of access to online resources. Many sites provide information about non-Federal resources but, given licensing restrictions, do not provide access to the resources themselves. Given the scope of this survey, which is to determine how sites provide the public with access to information generated by all entities, efforts have been made to determine if sites provide access to more than only U.S. Government resources. Given the considerable time required to thoroughly test access to a wide assortment of resources and the time restrictions associated with this survey, corrections to this segment of the survey are expected.

Questions regarding identification and access to images concern discretely identified collections of images (manuscripts, maps, photographs, etc.). At present, although several sites possess notable image collections, most sites in the survey do not.

Efforts have been made to identify and distinguish those sites that refer users to partner sites (with some formal notice of partnership) from those that refer users to sites without such statements. Referrals for off site resources by Federal agencies, whether to partner sites or not, imply some responsibility to monitor off-site content. Although considered literature, access to Burton's translation of the *Kama Sutra* from a tertiary site pointed to by a surveyed U.S. Government agency may seem inappropriate to some people.

The Survey Matrix

Selected Information Extracted from the Survey:

All nineteen sites contained various statements concerning the scope of the "collection" or of resources associated with services.

All but one site contained information concerning the scope of services provided by personnel associated with the site.

All but one site provided some level of access to online information.

Only two of nineteen sites included statements associated with online archives or services associated with "permanent public access" to online resources.

Data collected indicate the following with regard to types of resources made available:

84.21% of sites (16) provide access to online serials

78.94% of sites (15) provide access to online monographs
78.94% of sites (15) provide access to online databases
31.57% of sites (6) provide access to online maps

Data collected indicate the following with regard to how sites identify available information:

68.42% of sites (13) identify resources via browse applications
57.89% of sites (11) contain a general search window
52.63% of sites (10) identify resources via bibliographic records
52.63% of browse applications (10) are browse titles
47.63% of browse applications (9) are browse topics
10.52% of sites (2) identify resources via GILS
5.26% of browse applications (1) are browse report numbers

Data collected indicate the following with regard to the accessibility of information identified by search applications:

63.15% of sites (12) restrict access to some online resources, including some resources published by some United States Government agencies.

Data collected indicate the following with regard to the presence of "Kid's Pages":

47.36% of sites (9) contain "Kid's Pages"

Data collected indicate the following with regard to online information referrals (links) to other sites:

68.42% of sites (13) link to non-partner U.S. agency sites
63.15% of sites (12) link to non-partner education sites
52.63% of sites (10) link to non-partner commercial sites
42.10% of sites (8) link to non-partner state and/or local government sites
31.57% of sites (6) link to U.S. agency sites identified as partners of the institution

The following selected sites contain what I consider to be notable or unique applications:

Environmental Protection Agency:
Your Community application, which allows users to input a zip code to retrieve information concerning local sites associated with reported violations of environmental laws, rules, and regulations.

GPO Access:
Notable for more than 11,000 bibliographic records with hyper links to online United States Government

resources and for Ben's Guide, with applications that provide information relating to the processes of local, state, and national governments for children of all ages and adults.

Library of Congress:
Hundreds of thousands of images and many sound recordings associated with the American Memory Project and online galleries of exhibitions.

NIST Virtual Library:
Organization charts with links to related personnel, programs and services associated with NIST organizations.

NOAA Library:
Astonishing assortment of images and links associated with climate and weather.

Smithsonian Institution Libraries:
Hundreds of thousands of images of art and artifacts selected from the collections.

Labor Dept. Library and Wirtz Labor Library:
Images of labor movement related posters.

Institute of Peace Library:
Links to foreign ministries, governments, and peace related institutes and research centers.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS:

An initial review of survey data suggests the following:

Most sites use a combination of bibliographic records, browse applications, and search windows for identifying and providing access to online information.

With the exception of two sites, GILS applications are not used for identification/access to information.

No one method, either bibliographic records, browse applications, search windows, or GILS applications account for 100% of the means for identifying or accessing online information. Sites provide users with options for accessing selected types of information and may provide multiple applications based, in part, on differing degrees of labor that are required to create and maintain applications.

At most sites, a user's ability to identify online resources does not guarantee access to resources that have been identified. Although restrictions to access are most commonly associated with commercial information, some services also restrict access to some U.S. Government information resources.

Thoughts Concerning the Future of Online Information Services

Predictions concerning the future depend upon many factors. These include how effectively and persistently the public expresses interests in improving online services, the level of appropriated funds available to U.S. Government agencies for development of online services, and the priority for spending appropriations on online resource applications within individual agencies.

Appropriations aside, it is likely that much of the experimentation that characterized many of the "here today, gone tomorrow" applications at Federal websites during the past six or seven years will be replaced by more stable applications. These methods will reflect an emerging sense of "best practices" for making online information accessible. Applications will continue to evolve and no single method for identifying and accessing information is likely to replace alternative methods. I believe, however, that it is reasonable to make the following predictions:

Regardless of press releases and agency hype, no single information service will be adequate to the task of providing comprehensive, predictable, and authoritative description and access to all online resources published by United States Government agencies. Such a service is possible only with the infusion of massive appropriations to fund an infrastructure that is capable of identifying, describing, and providing access to all known U.S. Government resources.

Efforts to create "one-stop-shopping" sites such as FirstGov.gov, with links to many other sites, may evolve to provide the public with a useful adjunct to locating well established services maintained by major agency providers.

Agencies will continue to improve main pages of websites to provide users with a more intuitive sense of how to identify and access online resources that fall within the scope of agency interests.

An increased number of agencies will apply resources to maintain archival services, to support data migration, and to provide permanent public access to many online works.

The imbedding of metadata (information about information) into online publications for identifying such information as titles, series, etc. will support improved data collection needed for more automated cataloging and locator service applications.

No matter how inaccurate these predictions, readers may be assured that the continued use of the Internet to provide online information will make for few dull moments, both for those who provide online services and for those who use them.

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[i] *FLICC Factsheet -- Federal Library and Information Centers: A National Resource*. The Federal Library and Information Center Committee, Library of Congress, 2000.

[ii] *Performance Measures for Federal Agency Websites: Final Report to Sponsoring Agencies: Defense Technical Information Center Energy Information Administration Government Printing Office*, by Charles R. McClure, et. al., October 1, 2000.

[iii] *The United States Government Manual 2000/2001*, Office of the Federal Registrar, National Archives and Records Administration, revised June 1, 2000.

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About the presenter:

Thomas A. Downing has been the Chief of GPO's Cataloging Branch, Library Programs Service since 1992. Prior to this time he held management positions in GPO's Documents Sales Service. He holds a BA in Political Science from Western Michigan University, a Master of Arts in Hebrew Literature and Cognate Studies from Hebrew Union College, and a Master of Science in Library and Information Science from Simmons College. Tad, as he is most widely known, has published articles in such journals as the Journal of Government Information, The Serials Librarian, CONSERLINE, and the OCLC Newsletter. He has represented the National Cataloging and Indexing Program for U.S. Government Publications before national and state library associations and is GPO's representative to CONSER and BIBCO. Tad leads the Cataloging Branch's participation in OCLC's CORC Project and is on the editorial board of The Serials Librarian. His operational interests include identifying and evaluating the most feasible options for providing efficient and effective cataloging services and access to online publications within the context of evolving national standards.

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Summary:

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